DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 486 CG 031 267

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TITLE Gender, Power, and Autobiographical Memory.
PUB DATE 2001-08-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association (109th, San Francisco, CA, August 24-28, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Autobiographies; College Students; Higher Education; *Identification (Psychology); *Interpersonal Relationship; Leadership Qualities; Minority Groups; Personality Measures; *Role; Self Actualization; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS *Power

ABSTRACT

This study explores the influence of gender and power on autobiographical memory following a brief social interaction. The hypothesis stated that gender and social role (that of leaders versus helpers) would interact in predicting the affective tone and themes (agency and communion) of an autobiographical memory for previous leadership experiences. This was examined by investigating the emotional quality and content of personal memories of a power experience described by 150 undergraduates after a transient interaction. The participants, divided into pairs, completed a 15-minute discussion task. In this interaction relative power was manipulated by randomly assigning participants to the role of either a leader or a helper. The results partially supported the hypothesis, showing that participants of both sexes randomly assigned to a subordinate position used more words pertaining to communal themes, fewer communication words, and shame words more frequently than participants assigned to a leadership role. Gender also interacted with social role in affecting autobiographical memories. Women assigned to subordinate positions tended to use negative emotional words and anxiety words more frequently than men in subordinate positions. These data may have far reaching implications for how the subordinate roles typically played by women and minority groups influence their self construals. (Contains 15 references.) (JDM)

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Gender, Power, and Autobiographical Memory

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Poster presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association in San-Francisco, CA., August, 2001.

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Gender, Power and Autobiographical Memory

Nakash-Eisikovits, O., Brody, R. L., Sotoo, N., & Gonzalez, K.

Abstract

The present study explores the influence of gender and power on autobiographical memory following a brief social interaction. We hypothesized that gender and social role (that of leaders versus helpers) would interact in predicting the affective tone and themes (agency and communion) of an autobiographical memory for previous leadership experiences. In order to examine this hypothesis we investigated the emotional quality and content of personal memories of a power experience described by 150 undergraduates after a transient interaction. The participants were divided into pairs (same sex and mixed sex), and completed a 15-minute discussion task. In this interaction relative power was experimentally manipulated by randomly assigning the participants to either a role of a leader or the role of a helper. The results partially supported our hypothesis and showed that participants of both sexes who were randomly assigned to a subordinate position used more words pertaining to communal themes, fewer communication words, and tended to use shame words more frequently than participants who were assigned to a leadership role. Gender also tended to interact with social role in affecting autobiographical memories. Women who were assigned to subordinate positions tended to use negative emotional words and anxiety words more frequently than men in subordinate positions. These data may have far reaching implications for how the subordinate roles typically played by women and minority groups influence their self construals.

Gender, Power, and Autobiographical Memory

MAJOR QUESTION

How do gender and relative power in a transient social interaction influence the affective tone and themes (agency and communion) of autobiographical memories for leadership experiences?

HYPOTHESES

We hypothesized that gender and social roles (leaders vs. helpers) would interact in predicting the affective quality and themes of an autobiographical memory for previous leadership experiences, such that:

- **Relative to men, women in leadership roles would describe more negatively laden and less positively laden affect autobiographical memories. The memories would contain more communal themes, and fewer agentic themes.**
- **Compared to men, women in subordinate roles would describe more positively laden and less negatively laden affect autobiographical memories. The memories would contain more communal themes, and fewer agentic themes.**

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

- **These predictions were based on recent research showing that for both sexes, dysphoric emotions emerge when expectable stereotypic gender roles (leadership positions for men and helping positions for women) are violated (Brody et al, 1999; Fong & Tiedens, 2000).**

- A plethora of theoretical and empirical work suggests that women have relatively more communal, interdependent self-schemas, whereas men have relatively more agentic, independent self-schemas (see Cross & Madson, 1997).
- Recent research has also shown that autobiographical memories are influenced by social context (i.e., Marian & Neisser, 2000)

SAMPLE

- 150 college students (88 female, 62 male) aged 17 to 22 (M age female = 18.5; M age male = 18.7).
- 81.3% American (76.2% European- American, 6.6% Jewish American, 5.7% Hispanic American, 3.3% Asian American, 1.6% Indian American, 0.8% African American).
- 18.7% non Americans (50% Asian, 28.6 % European, 10.7% Hispanic, 3.6% Indian, 3.6% African).

PROCEDURE

Participants were told that the purpose of the experiment was to study the effects of leadership on creativity.

- Participants initially completed several self report measures, including a brief demographic questionnaire, the Self Construal Questionnaire (SCQ: Singelis, 1994), which examines independent versus interdependent personality characteristics, The Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ: Spence & Helmreich, 1978), which explores stereotypical gender roles (e.g., communion versus agency), the Dominance scale of the California Psychological Inventory

(CPI *Do*: Gough, 1969), and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule questionnaire (PANAS: Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) asking for their emotional experiences at the moment.

- Participants were then randomly divided into pairs, and assigned the roles of either a helper or leader through a lottery procedure (29 female-female pairs; 18 male-male pairs; 16 male-leader female-helper pairs; 12 female-leader male-helper pairs). Each pair participated in a discussion task in which they had to decide which 7 people should be saved if the Earth were to be destroyed. Choices could be based on age, ethnicity, gender, professional background, life experiences, etc. They were asked to work together for 15 minutes to come with the most creative answer they could. It was emphasized that leaders would make all decisions and direct the discussion.
- After completion of the task, participants were asked to describe in writing an autobiographical experience in which they were in a power position. Examples given to students included teaching a class, being a camp counselor, etc.

RESULTS

A repeated measures MANOVA 2(role) by 2(sex of leader) by 2(sex of helper) using the emotional experience factors (derived from factor analysis of the PANAS questionnaire) and self construal factors (derived from factor analysis of the Self Construal, PAQ, and the CPI *Do*) as outcome variables, with role being the repeated measure revealed that there were no significant differences between leaders and helpers on any of the two self construal factors (i.e., communion,

agency) and nine emotions (i.e., anger, fear, pride, excitement, depression, shame-guilt, sympathy, contempt, and pity) prior to the experimental manipulation.

The autobiographical memories were analyzed through a software program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count 2nd version (Pennebaker and Francis, 1996; Pennebaker and Francis, 1999). The average number of words in stories was 166 (s.d.=67). The program provides the frequencies (in percentage of total words) of 76 specific word categories. Among the categories are psychological processes, which include positive and negative emotions, and standard linguistic dimensions such as articles and pronouns. We programmed four new categories (shame, pride, communion, and agency), which were pertinent for our research questions. Words used to denote communion included 51 different words (e.g., communal, connect, relate, support). Words used to denote agency included 42 different words (e.g., autonomy, different, detach, independent) (based on Mansfield & McAdams, 1996; Ely, Melzi, Hadge, & McCabe, 1998; Hurley, 1998). These categories were subsequently used as variables in MANOVA analyses.

- A repeated measure MANOVA 2(role) * 2(sex of leader) * 2(sex of helper) using 10 communion and agency variables as outcome measures (communion, communication, other-references, we, you, other, social, agency, I, self), with role being the repeated measure showed a significant multivariate effect for role ($F(10,60) = 2.24$, $p<.05$), and significant univariate effects for:
    - communion: ($F(1, 69) = 6.19$, $p=.01$)
    - "we": ($F(1, 69) = 3.39$, $p=.06$)
    - communication: ($F(1, 69) = 3.46$, $p=.07$)

Helpers' autobiographical memories included more frequent words related to communion themes, as well as more frequent use of the pronoun "we" than leaders' memories. Leaders' memories included more frequent communication words (e.g., talk, say) than helpers' memories. There were no significant main effects for gender or for gender x role.

- A repeated measure MANOVA 2(role) * 2(sex of leader) * 2(sex of helper) using 9 different emotional variables as outcomes (positive feelings, positive emotions, optimism, pride, negative emotions, anxiety, anger, sadness, shame), with role being the repeated measure did not show a significant multivariate effect for role. However, there was a significant univariate role effect for shame ($F(1,69) = 6.20$, $p < .05$), such that helpers' autobiographical memories included more frequent shame words than leaders. In addition, although there was no significant multivariate effect for sex of helper, there was a significant univariate effect for negative emotions ($F(1,69) = 5.42$, $p < .05$) and a trend for anxiety ($F(1,69) = 3.10$, $p = .08$), such that female helpers' autobiographical memories included more frequent negative emotion words and more specifically anxiety words than did men's memories.

CONCLUSIONS

- Social roles of leaders versus helpers in a transient interaction influenced the affective quality and themes of autobiographical memories. Participants' differential emphases on communal versus agentic themes in their autobiographical narratives were in a direction consistent with the nature of the

roles they had just played. For helpers, who had played a subordinate, supporting role in the interaction, communal themes were heightened, including the specific word "we", and other communal words, such as "connect" and "support". For leaders, who had played the more powerful, influential role, communication words were heightened, which may function to influence others, thus facilitating positions of power. These results suggest that the nature of the social roles people engage in - that is, the functions they perform- may influence their self-construals, an argument consistent with those made by many gender-role theorists and by social constructionists in general (Eagly, 1987; Brody, 1999).

- Gender, on the other hand, also tended to interact with social role in affecting autobiographical memories. Women who were assigned to subordinate positions tended to use negative emotional words and anxiety words more frequently than men in subordinate positions. This suggests that women are more sensitized to, or expressive of, the impact that subordinate roles play in their lives.
- These data may have far reaching implications on how the subordinate roles typically played by women and minority groups influence their self construals. If a brief social interaction between strangers can significantly impact autobiographical memories, it is not hard to imagine what a lifetime of such experiences can do.

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Table no. 2

Means and S.D. of the Frequency (in Percentage of Total Words) of Different LIWC Categories Derived from the Analysis of Autobiographical Memories Varying with Role

	Leaders N= 74 M (S.D.)	Helpers N= 74 M (S.D.)
Negative emotion	1.11 (1.06)	1.15 (1.05)
Anxiety	0.36 (0.62)	0.37 (0.67)
Shame	0.04 (0.17)	0.14 (0.36)
Communion theme	0.08 (0.21)	0.36 (0.79)
We	0.42 (0.62)	0.62 (0.83)
Communication	1.88 (1.53)	1.44 (1.19)

Table no. 3

Means and S.D. of the Frequency (in Percentage of Total Words) of Different LIWC Categories Derived from the Analysis of Autobiographical Memories Varying with Sex

	Females N= 88 M (S.D.)	Males N= 62 M (S.D.)
Negative emotion	1.19 (1.08)	1.04 (1.01)
Anxiety	0.42 (0.62)	0.29 (0.67)
Shame	0.08 (0.25)	0.09 (0.34)
Communion theme	0.23 (0.71)	0.20 (0.39)
We	0.51 (0.71)	0.53 (0.77)
Communication	1.57 (1.27)	1.80 (1.54)